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 Date 30 May 1991

CIA CHIEF SAYS GORBACHEV FUTURE INCREASINGLY IN DOUBT

By Jim Wolf

LANGLEY, Virginia, May 30, Reuter - Outgoing CIA director William Webster said on Thursday that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's future is "increasingly uncertain" because of a failure to turn around the slumping economy.

"Moses didn't get to the promised land, and this may be the case with Gorbachev," he told reporters in a farewell briefing at CIA headquarters in this leafy Washington suburb.

"The way I've couched it is his future is increasingly uncertain," Webster said. He painted a grim picture of a Soviet Union possibly on the brink of dismemberment, with a central government increasingly worried about preventing nuclear weapons from falling into "unfriendly" hands.

By contrast, Webster said President Saddam Hussein was rebuilding his country's war-battered infrastructure and appeared to be "very much in charge" of Iraq.

Saddam has made a few "gestures towards power-sharing, but I wouldn't call it permanent and I wouldn't call it significant," Webster said.

The CIA chief, who announced his retirement earlier this month, said the Soviet Union was losing as much as 40 per cent of its food to spoilage before it reaches the market.

"I cannot really see any specific focus on improvement of the infrastructure," he said. "I cannot understand why this has never been central to their objective."

He said he detected no significant economic change in the Soviet Union and no success in dealing with a declining infrastructure in roads, electricity and railways.

"The indicators there continue to go down and that will put enormous pressure" on Gorbachev because of pent-up demand for goods and services, Webster said.

He added that Gorbachev, a reformer who championed glasnost, or openness, had unleashed forces that "went beyond his own vision" and ability to manage.

He said the map of the Soviet Union could begin changing before the end of the year as breakaway republics press for independence in the teeth of what is likely to be efforts by Moscow to make their departure "more costly."

He did not elaborate on steps Moscow might take to try to halt or slow some republics' independence drive.

Webster spoke to representatives of 16 news organisations

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over breakfast. His remarks were delayed briefly while he briefed President George Bush at the White House.

Webster did not speculate on the timing of any future Gorbachev departure. But he said some politicians, including Russian Republic leader Boris Yeltsin, may deem it in their interest to have him in the Kremlin now as they pursue their own interests.

Gorbachev is now seeking billions of dollars in direct aid from the United States, Japan and Western European nations to prop up his sagging economy.

Moscow was seeking this aid with ``as yet no clear game plan for how that infusion of capital will produce lasting results rather than being temporary stopgaps,' ' Webster said.

He said the Soviet Union was continuing to modernise its long-range strategic capability in what he called an essentially defensive mode. ``But it raises a number of questions. Could the assets themselves fall into unfriendly hands in the course of internal struggles that could then precipitate problems for us?''